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# An Evaluation of Prophecy in Greek Tragedy According to the Dramatic Theory of Aristotle

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AN EVALUATION OF PROPHECY IN GREEK TRAGEDY  
ACCORDING TO  
THE DRAMATIC THEORY OF ARISTOTLE  
BY  
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A D

MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM

E T

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## INTRODUCTION

THE POETICS     The Poetics is the product of a combination of circumstances unique in the history of dramatic theory. Three centuries before its composition the tragic drama had been born of Greek genius, had grown to the perfection and beauty of the fifth century, and declined to the mediocre repetitions of the fourth. It was at this time that it became the subject of study for one of the brightest intellects which the world has ever seen. In perspective he could view the entire field of Greek drama. Bringing to his study the same analytical penetration which he applied to metaphysics, Aristotle sought out the principles upon which tragedy is founded and set them forth briefly in his Poetics. As Courthope observes:

Though the Poetics is not an elaborate treatise on technical practice, it is exhaustive in its examination of principle, and the condensed philosophical epigrams, which drop from the writer in a manner elsewhere unusual to him, show how deeply he had thought upon the subject. (1)

Since the principles which he established are founded on the very nature of the drama, they endure through the superficial changes in form which characterize different countries and different ages. For all peoples and for all times the Poetics has become a handbook of dramatic principle. In dramatic theory no less than in metaphysics and ethics it is true that -

"beneath most paths of modern thought endure the foundations laid by the master of Alexander the Great". (2)

It must not be thought, however, that the Poetics is a compendium of 'a priori' conclusions. Rather, it constitutes a set of principles deduced from the end and purpose of tragedy and from the means which the masters of the art used to attain that end. Aristotle's method was inductive. From an analytical and critical consideration of the tragedies which he read and saw he drew up the rules which must be observed if a play is to be true drama and true tragedy. The principles which he established are not numerous, but they are essential.

If the Poetics is valuable to the student of drama, it has special value for the student of Greek drama. In this brief work we have preserved for us the considered judgment of one who was eminently fitted for the task of criticism. To the work he brought an extraordinary mind, sharpened to razor keenness by metaphysical speculation. His study was limited to the form which the tragic art took among the ancient Greeks. He was not restricted to the written page, but could see the play put on the stage amidst the setting for which it was written. He looked at the play not with the eyes of a stranger of later ages but with those of a contemporary. His attitude was not merely appreciative, but also analytical. Indeed, we have in him the 'trained spectator' whom he himself considered the proper critic of a work of art. Therefore, the Poetics furnishes the student of Greek tragedy with a splendid norm for judging the various



plays in their proper light.

Before proceeding to a statement of the problem let us consider an aspect of Greek tragedy which enters into the question.

RELIGIOUS NATURE  
OF  
GREEK TRAGEDY

"The history of art from its lowest manifestations to its highest gives evidence of its union and intimacy with religion" says

Father Donnelly in Art Principles In Literature (3). The evidence of this intimate union between art and religion is strikingly clear in the Greek tragedy. It was Greek religion which gave birth to tragedy, which fostered its development, and which brought it to its full-blown splendor in the Golden Age of Greece. For among the Greeks the tragedy was not merely a form of higher entertainment, but more especially an act of religious worship. It had its beginning in a lyric poem, called a dithyramb, which was sung by a leader and a chorus before the altar of the god Dionysos (4). By a gradual process this simple ceremony was elaborated: action became more prominent than song, the original leader was replaced by three actors, the chorus faded into the background until it became the 'sympathetic spectator' of the fifth century tragedy. Still, though the form had changed, the tragedy always retained its original nature; it was still a part of the public worship of a religious festival. These circumstances of its origin and presentation explain the strong religious flavor of the Greek tragedy which even the casual reader cannot fail to notice:

After the tragic art had attained to its maturity

in Athens, it was still only at the solemn festivals of Dionysus that plays were exhibited. The representation of a tragedy was thus in a true and proper sense an act of public worship rendered by the State to one of its Gods. If the spirit of Greek drama is pre-eminently religious, it is therefore no more than we should expect from a consideration of its origin and history. (5)

And, it might be added, the religious tone of Greek drama is no more than we should expect from a consideration of the life which it represents. It is only reasonable that the important part which the gods played in the every day life of the ordinary Greek should find reflection in the drama. Greek tragedy, therefore, as an act of worship and as a reflection of Greek life received its distinctive tone from Greek religion.

Since this is so, it is small wonder that the tragedians incorporated in their plays some of the elements of contemporary religious belief which they found useful adjuncts for the working out of their plots. It must be remembered that the current religious doctrines of fifth century Greece were not the lofty speculations of the philosophers, but the traditional theology which had been crystallized by Homer in his epics of the heroic age and handed down through the succeeding generations.

Homer and Hesiod had long been the religious school-masters of Greece. The Golden Age bore them in Pindar and the tragic poets able commentators and successors ..... Frankly accepting the traditional polytheistic mythology, they still made notable advances in its inner interpretation. (6)

The tenets of this traditional polytheistic religion which enter

into the plots of the tragedians, and hence fall within the scope of our study, might be formulated as follows: 1) the gods are like men in all things except in their superior knowledge and power; 2) since they are like men they take a personal interest in human affairs; 3) they can appear in person to men, and in the heroic age when many gods had mortal sons, did appear to them; 4) they prophesy to man through their oracles and soothsayers. These last two elements of popular belief, namely, theophany and prophecy provided the tragedians with a convenient means for ravelling and unravelling comparatively intricate plots. That they fully realized the dramatic possibilities of these doctrines is amply attested by the frequency with which they occur in Greek tragedy.

PROBLEM It has been noted above that Aristotle's method was inductive and that the Poetics is the fruit of analytical study. Since this is so, it is a curious fact that the philosopher has left us no account of his opinion concerning that characteristic and important element of Greek tragedy, the prophecies of the oracles and soothsayers. The fact that there are ten such prophecies in the seven extant plays of Sophocles is evidence of their frequency and importance. It is certain that Aristotle was not unaware of the preternatural element in Greek tragedy since he explicitly condemns the visible appearance of the gods upon the stage. Still, he has nothing to say concerning prophecy - he neither commends nor explicitly condemns it.

It is the purpose of this thesis, therefore, to examine the prophecies which occur in the tragedies of Sophocles in the light of the principles enunciated in the Poetics for the purpose of determining what the mind of Aristotle was with respect to this element. There are two reasons for selecting the plays of Sophocles as the subject of our study. In the first place, he represents Greek tragedy at its best. He was a master not only of beautiful diction, but especially of artistic plot structure. In the second place, he was a favorite of Aristotle. There can be no doubt of this in the mind of one who reads the Poetics. Speaking of the attitude of Aristotle towards Sophocles, Butcher says:

Sophocles he admires not for the purity of his ethical teaching or for his deep religious teaching, but for the unity which pervades the structure of his dramas, and the closely linked sequence of parts which work up to an inevitable end. (7)

The solution of this problem will affect our judgment of the merits not merely of the tragedies of Sophocles, but also of the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides. In their dramas, no less than in those of Sophocles, we find prophecy. This may be looked upon as an extrinsic argument for the validity of supra-natural knowledge. For if three men, admittedly masters of the tragic art, repeatedly use prophecy as a source of tragic effect, it must be legitimate or their works would not be considered master-pieces of that art. This conclusion, however, is not quite justified. When we say that their works are master-pieces we do not mean to say that they are perfect in every

respect. It may be that, in spite of a violation of a law of tragedy, they obtain their effect and not because of it. So it is that even Aristotle, admitting, as he does, that Homer was the master of the epic, frequently criticizes his work, pointing out that the poem would have better attained its effect by the observance of the law than by its violation.

The solution of our problem has a modern significance also. Although oracles and soothsayers are found only in the ancient drama, they have a modern counter-part in the ghosts and witches of Shakespeare. The witches and the ghost of Banquo in Macbeth, the ghost of Hamlet's father, the ghost of Caesar - all have knowledge which surpasses that of humans. Nor have modern commentators over-looked the part which this knowledge plays in the Shakesperian drama. Concerning this element A.C.Bradley remarks:

Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural into some of his tragedies; he introduces ghosts, and witches who have supernatural knowledge. This supernatural element certainly cannot in most cases, if in any, be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters. And further, it does contribute to the action, and is in more than one instance an indispensable part of it. (8)

Since the principles of Aristotle are fundamental, not only to ancient but also to modern tragedy, the answer to our question involves the legitimacy and significance of the ghosts and witches of Shakespeare or of whatever else of this nature which appears in modern drama.

In view of the fact that both the Poetics of Aristotle

and the tragedies of Sophocles have been fine-combed by commentators, it is strange that the question of the dramatic validity and the tragic significance of prophecy has never been broached. That modern commentators have noticed the significance of the supra-natural knowledge in the plays of Shakespeare has been pointed out above. An explanation of this oversight on the part of the students of the Poetics may be found in the fact that they would not consider it within the scope of their study since it is not mentioned by Aristotle. To those who have studied the tragedies of Sophocles prophecy may have seemed merely a reflection of the religious nature of the Greek drama. Whatever the explanation of their silence may be, it is certain that the question has not been considered by standard commentators.

ORDER OF      "Tragedy, then," says Aristotle, "is an imitation  
TREATMENT      of an action that is serious, complete, and of a  
                 certain magnitude". (9) The definition of drama as  
an 'imitation' is an essential point in the theory of Aristotle.  
The meaning of this term, however, is by no means clear and has  
given rise to much discussion among commentators. In view of  
this fact the first chapter will be devoted to an explanation  
of this Aristotelian concept. Then, in the second chapter, the  
prophecies in the plays of Sophocles will be examined for the  
purpose of determining whether they would incur the censure of  
Aristotle as violations of the principles of dramatic 'imita-  
tion'. "But again, Tragedy is an imitation not only of a com-

plete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity". (10)

This function of tragedy distinguishes it from the other forms of drama. Therefore, in the third chapter, the prophecies will be studied with a view to learning whether they render the action more terrible or pitiful and, consequently, possess special value for tragedy.

## NOTES

1. William John Courthope, Life In Poetry, Law In Taste, p. 191.
2. F. L. Lucas, Tragedy, In Relation To Aristotle's Poetics, p. 11.
3. Francis P. Donnelly, S.J., Art Principles In Literature, p. 31.
4. Cf. R. C. Jebb, The Growth And Influence Of Classical Greek Literature, p. 157.
5. James Adams, The Religious Teachers Of Greece, p. 138.
6. George C. Ring, S.J., Gods Of The Gentiles, p. 229.
7. S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory Of Poetry And Fine Art, p. 225.
8. A. C. Bradley, Shakesperean Tragedy, p. 14.
9. Poetics, 1449b 24-25. The translation of the Poetics used throughout is that of Butcher.
10. Ibid., 1452a 1-3.



## CHAPTER ONE

### ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF DRAMATIC 'IMITATION'

'IMITATION' AND PHILOSOPHY      Plato's answer to a fundamental problem in philosophy determined his attitude towards art and furnished his disciple, Aristotle, with a term which was destined to become immortal in the theory of the drama. The problem which confronted Plato was the apparent antithesis between the testimony of his senses and that of his intellect. His senses presented material being as infinitely varied and variable; his intellect perceived material being as one and stable. To take an example: as he looked about him he saw thousands of men, men who differed from one another in a thousand ways; on the other hand, everybody spoke of 'man' and predicated things of him as of one being. In brief, the sense images were many, but the intellectual concept, the idea, was one. This unity of concept was necessary for any knowledge, since there could be no science of variable individuals; all definition was of the universal. Plato, therefore, 'solved' the problem by asserting the reality of the object of the intellect and denying the reality of the objects of sense; the latter, he said, have merely the 'appearance' (phenomena) of reality. Since the Ideas, the object of the intellect, are the

only true realities, they have separate existence; there exists in a super-mundane world an Idea of everything that is found in the universe. (1) The varied and variable objects of sense perception are but shadows of these realities, mere appearances and nothing more. When our senses apprehend these appearances, the reality, the Idea, which we knew before our birth, is recalled to our mind. Thus was the problem solved at the expense of material being.

Plato's evaluation of art flowed logically from his philosophy. The artist, by the very nature of his sensible medium, cannot attain to the portrayal of the non-sensible Idea; all that he can do is to represent the outward appearances of things material - which are themselves but shadows of reality ! He is little more than an animated camera; his work is an imitation which is twice removed from truth and useless for knowledge of the universal. "The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing of true existence; he knows appearances only" (2) 'Imitation', then, is at once Plato's definition of, and accusation against, art.

When Aristotle came to define art he retained his master's term of 'imitation', but the meaning which he attached to it differed 'toto coelo' from that of Plato. An accurate concept of the term as used by Aristotle is absolutely essential for a clear understanding of his dramatic theory since 'imitation' is the font from which all other principles flow as corollaries. But "Aristotelem nonnisi ex ipso Aristotele intelliges" - to

appreciate the significance of the word a knowledge of its philosophical background is necessary; for, just as Plato's depreciation of art flowed from his answer to the problem of the one and the many, so Aristotle's appreciation depended upon his response to the same problem.

In his explanation of this seeming paradox Aristotle denied neither element of the problem. According to him the manifold objects of our senses are as real as the universal of our intellect; the testimony of our senses to multiplicity is as true as the testimony of our intellect to unity. As a matter of fact, there could be no knowledge of the universal without perception of the individual since the universal does not exist separated from individuals, but is found in the particular things of sense (3). The explanation of this apparent contradiction is found in the constitution of material beings which are apprehended by the senses.

In the individual substance Aristotle distinguished two elements, or principles of being - matter ( $\sigma\lambda\eta$ ) and form ( $\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\delta\omicron\varsigma$ ,  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$ ) (4). Matter is that out of which all material substance is made; form is that into which the being is made. Matter is potency - the indeterminate substratum common to all material being; form is act - the principle of determination by which the substance is made to be what it is. They are not to be conceived as separate beings, but as principles of being; matter cannot exist without form, nor form without matter. Their union constitutes the concrete existing substance. By form the sub-

stance is constituted in its specific nature (man, dog, tree, etc.) and from the form come all the perfections proper to that nature; from the matter which receives the form arise the individuating qualities, the imperfections, and the limitations of the substance. Therefore, all things of the same species have the same form which is individuated by the matter which receives it. Thus, because of its substantial form this being is a dog and not a cat; because of the matter which receives the form this dog is Fido and not Rover. By reason of the form Fido should have all the perfections which are proper to a dog, but because of the imperfections arising from the matter which receives the form, the potencies are never completely actualized - and Fido is just Fido !

The individual thing, then, which is apprehended by the senses has two principles of being - matter and form.

The form, then, considered apart from the matter, is the essence of the object as far as intellectual knowledge is concerned; for intellectual knowledge has for its object the universal, and since matter is the principle of individuation, and form the principle of specification, the conclusion of the inquiry as to the object of intellectual knowledge is that matter and the individual qualities arising from matter belong to sense-knowledge, while the form alone, which is universal, belongs to intellectual knowledge. (5)

The individual thing with its individuating qualities and imperfections which arise from the matter is apprehended by the senses. The mind spontaneously prescind from the individuating notes of the matter and abstracts those notes which are essential to the being; in other words, the intellect grasps

the form, which form, as we saw, is universal because it is the same in all members of the species. The abstracted form, however, is only the material, or direct universal; the formal, or reflexive, universal is had when the mind compares this abstract concept with other beings and perceives that it can be predicated of a large number of them in the same way; then only is the form realized to be universal. Consequently, although that which is universal is found in the individuals of sense, as universal it can exist only in the mind. In this way, according to Aristotle, can there be one and many; the individuals of sense perception are real, in fact they are the prime reality since upon them is founded the universal of the intellect. As Turner notes (6), the difference between Plato and Aristotle lies in the fact that, whereas the former separated Idea from phenomena, the latter merely distinguished form from matter.

With respect to our ideas an important fact must be noted. Although by our initial abstraction we perceive the form, we grasp it merely in its broadest determinations; it is only by experience with various individuals of the species that we come to a clear and comprehensive idea of the nature, or form, of the being. By an unconscious comparison of the individuals we gradually discern more notes which are common to all members of the species and therefore arise from the common form. In other words, by experience we fill in our first sketchy outline of the form; we come to see better all the things which were

implied in the original concept. Although a child's idea of human nature is true and is sufficient to enable him to distinguish man from all other beings, still there is a vast difference between his idea and that which a venerable arm-chair philosopher has derived from the rich experience of a life-time.

'IMITATION'  
AND ART

In Aristotle's theory, then, the artist is a man, who, by rich experience and especially by his peculiar gift of perception, possesses a deep insight into the nature of things; he has acquired a clear and comprehensive idea of the forms; he knows the permanent, essential possibilities of things. His mind, however, does not rest in the contemplation of the abstract form; his imagination forms a picture of the being as it would be if it corresponded to the idea, if the form were completely to actualize the matter. His mental picture is better than the real thing because in it the form is unimpeded by the imperfections of the matter which receives it in actual existence; his mental picture tends to be universal because in it the universal form is less impeded by the individuating matter - the form is resplendent; the being of his imagination is more like the prototype in the Mind of God than is the thing of real existence. This mental image of perfection the artist tries to reproduce in his artistic medium, whether it be stone, color, sound, or language. Through this reproduction he wishes to call up in the imagination of others the perfection which he has conceived. Therefore, he fashions his medium and creates an illusion, a semblance, of the ideal

being of his mind:

Art ..... creating after a pattern existing in the mind, must be skilled in the use of illusion. By this alone can it give coherence to its creations and impart to its fictions an air of reality. (7)

Therefore, a work of art is an 'imitation' - but it is not an imitation of individuals; it is an 'imitation' of their form, the universal principle of perfection, which is found in each individual and apprehended by the idea. In the philosophy of Aristotle an 'imitation' is not a copy of the thing, but a creation, in some medium, of a likeness which corresponds to the idea of the being. As Butcher puts it (8), the 'imitation' is an "idealized reproduction". It is a picture of the thing as it would be if it were free from the imperfections arising from the matter; it is a manifestation of the eternal possibilities of the form. Therefore Aristotle says that the 'imitation' "tends to express the universal" (9), that it makes things 'better' (10), "as they should be" (11). For him:

Fine art was no longer twice removed from the truth of things; it was the manifestation of a higher truth, the expression of the universal which is not outside of and apart from the particular. The work of art was not a semblance opposed to reality, but the image of a reality which is penetrated by the idea, and through which the idea shows more apparent than in the actual world. (12)

The 'imitation' is not a photograph of Fido, but a picture of what Fido would be if he came up to the idea of a dog, if the form of dog were completely actualized in Fido. Consequently, "the ideal is the real, but rid of contradictions, unfolding

itself according to the laws of its own being" (13).

For the ancient Greeks only one object was worthy of 'imitation' - the one extolled by Sophocles in the well-known line of the Antigone: "Many wonders there be, but naught more wondrous than man" (14). Man, and man only, was considered by Aristotle and his contemporaries as the proper subject of art. Now, man is a living being and, according to Aristotle, "life consists in action" (15). Consequently, he defines the object of art not merely as 'men' but 'men in action' (16). It is evident, moreover, that when action is predicated of man it includes not only the external words and deeds which spring from his free will, but also his thoughts and emotions. Any art, then, which strives to 'imitate' man must be capable of reproducing in its medium there various aspects of human action; otherwise it cannot present a true picture of man.

The mediums which are employed by the different arts are capable of doing this in varying degrees. Although the expression of the face and the attitude of the body are natural reflections of emotion, still, painting and sculpture, dealing as they do with inanimate color and stone, can catch but a moment in the life of man and make that moment representative of the whole. Music, it is true, has peculiar power for expressing emotion, but it can give only a vague portrayal of the other aspects of human life. Poetry surpasses all in its power of expression and was, for Aristotle, the art 'par excellence'. The medium which it employs is language; through this the poet



can call up in the imagination of others not merely a passing moment but a whole 'chapter of life' (17); he can reproduce not merely emotion, but also deeds and character.

The original which it reflects is human action and character in all their diverse modes of manifestation; no other art has equal range of subject matter, or can present so complete and satisfying an image of its original. (18)

In this same medium of poetry, however, there are different ways, or manners, of reproducing human life, Aristotle points out:

For the medium being the same, and the objects the same, the poet may imitate by narration... .... or he may present all his characters as living and moving before us. (19)

Poetry, then, may be either narrative or dramatic. It is this latter method of presentation which Aristotle considers the best, the way of comedy and tragedy, in which "speech has its counterpart in speech, and, if the play is put on the stage, action is rendered by action" (20) Comedy and tragedy have the same dramatic form but different subject-matter; comedy presents the lighter aspects of life, tragedy the more serious.

'IMITATION' AND TRAGEDY	"Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; ..... in the form of action, not of narrative". (21) 'Imitation', as we saw, does not consist in copying the individual; it consists in reproducing an image which corresponds to the <u>idea</u> , to the <u>form</u> , of the thing. Tragedy, therefore, as an 'imitation', must reproduce an action
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which corresponds to the idea of man, to human nature. The dramatist must fashion a sequence of action - a plot ! - which, according to the nature of man, would be the probable or necessary result of a certain situation. "It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen, what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity" (22). The poet is not interested in what a man in that situation actually did or experienced, what really happened, but what, as a man, he should have done or experienced. The poet's plot, his "arrangement of incidents" (23), presents his idea of the probable human consequence of the original situation. Therefore the plot is the most important element of the tragedy - it is the 'imitation'. The qualities which Aristotle demands in its structure are such that, if they are absent, the plot fails to be an 'imitation' and is merely a chronicle.

First and foremost, Aristotle insists that the incidents be arranged "according to the law of probability and necessity" (24). This is the fundamental principle of poetic 'imitation'; it is "a law relating primarily to structure, not to subject matter, and one of Aristotle's most valuable contributions to literary theory" (25). According to this principle each incident of the plot must follow what has gone before, not merely in point of time, but as its probable or necessary effect. What happens in the drama must not happen by chance, but must be caused by the antecedents. "It makes all the difference

whether any given event is a case of 'propter hoc' or 'post hoc' " (26). The action of the plot must be an unbroken chain of causality. Therefore, a drama will not be an 'imitation' if the poet presents a situation and then proceeds to recount a series of unrelated incidents; the result is an epeisodic plot which Aristotle justly abhorred. "Of all plots and actions the epeisodic are the worst. I call a plot 'epeisodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence" (27).

Since the drama is concerned with men, the causal sequence of the action must be the result of the men engaged (28). Now, men are free beings; human action is determined by the will, influenced by the emotions. When all the requisites for action are present they are not by that fact determined to a specific act; they can act or not act, they can act one way or another. Hence, as Woodbridge observes, in the drama the "subject matter is the action and reaction of the human will" (29): what Oedipus says and does is what he wills. In its choice, however, the will is influenced by a motive which inclines it to choose one thing rather than another. In a sense, then, the motive, the reason which impels a man to do what he does, can be said to be the cause of human action. Therefore, causal sequence is had in the drama when each incident provides a motive for what follows.

It is in the determination of the proper human motivation that the personality of the poet comes into play as the creative

factor in the 'imitation'. The causal sequence of probability or necessity depends upon his knowledge of human nature. Given such a man and such a situation, the poet must represent a natural human reaction. His characters, it is true, will have stronger wills and more violent emotions than the general run of men, they will have a fuller humanity, but they should not have a different humanity. This latter will be the case if the poet portrays men whose actions are prompted by motives which are odd or freakish, or whose reactions are disproportionate to the motive. The reaction of a character should not be an idiosyncrasy of an individual, but the reflection of his human nature. With the man whose motives are narrow and personal we have nothing in common; it is only when the deeds and feelings are truly human that all men can make themselves one with the characters.

Excessive individualism, like the latest fashion, will be quaint and incongruous on the morrow. Homer lives eternal because through strange names and strange language and strange costumes we see our own sun and fields and ocean and sky and put our fingers on a pulse which registers the beat of a heart throbbing as ours. (30)

When the motivation is based on human nature the causality will not have to be explained to the reader or audience; for, being men, they will appreciate the motives of the characters, they will realize what they think and feel, and consequently they will understand what they do.

Nature is a language all can understand and human nature is a language all must and do understand. When lament was made over the body of Patroklos,

the elegy of Briseis stirred all, "and thereon the women wailed, in semblance for Patroklos, but each for her own woe". Similar is the appeal of art where in the semblance of something else, each sees what belongs to self. (31)

The second important principle of Aristotle is that of unity - nothing should be included in the drama which has not an essential relation to the end towards which the causal sequence is working. The plot should portray the working out of the initial situation to its logical conclusion without any lost motion. Incidents which are not essential links in the chain should be ruthlessly excluded. "For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole" (32). There is no place for side action, which, whatever its own intrinsic interest may be, has only a tenuous connection with the principal action. Everything must be carefully subordinated to the main issue. Unity will be achieved when every incident is an essential part of a sequence which converges on a definite point.

If all the incidents are directed to a single end and all are bound together by the causality of perfect motivation, the action of the plot will constitute a perfect whole:

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at hap-hazard, but conform to these principles. (33)

This whole will represent the 'working out' of the initial

situation according to probable or necessary human motivation and the conclusion will thereby be seen to have been implicit in the opening situation. For, when the beginning is the cause of the middle and the middle is the cause of the end, the end will be the effect of the beginning and the result will be one action which is an organic whole; it will be the process by which a cause attains its effect, each incident being a step in the process.

That, then, is the essence of tragic 'imitation': a causal sequence forming one whole action which is an image of what should happen according to the nature of man. What the poet says in effect is this: these characters are human beings; by reason of their nature they think, and feel, and determine their words and deeds accordingly. If they are placed in such and such a situation, the probable or necessary effect of such characters operating according to their nature will be that which is presented in the conclusion. According to Bywater -

The action in such a story is a  $\pi\rho\acute{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$  μία καὶ ὅλη, i.e. a whole with a beginning, middle, and end; each incident resulting from something that goes before it, and the entire series from the state of things presupposed, as the ἀρχή of the whole, at the beginning. (34)

The plot, therefore, constitutes an action which is a perfect expression of the human nature of the characters. It is an 'imitation' based, not on an individual of the species, but on his nature.

Therefore, this 'imitation' of life which the poet creates is, according to Aristotle, 'better' (βελτίων) (35) than real

life. The word 'better' is to be understood not in the moral, but in the ontological, sense. For if the probability of the sequence demands it, sin may be represented - but it should be represented as it truly is: a violation of the proper order and not the fulfillment of it. Ontologically the drama is better because its action is a better expression of human nature than is found in real life. In real life a situation rarely, if ever, works out according to the logical human consequence. Due to chance and unmotivated action which springs from the imperfection of the individual, a state of affairs, which naturally ought to lead to a definite conclusion, illogically results in its opposite. From his knowledge of human nature the poet constructs an image of life which presents things as they ought to be. "The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen" (36). Poetry, therefore, is, in the words of Father Donnelly -

a dramatizing, a staging of life, to be judged, not by its correspondence with fact, but by its own plausible and convincing rationalization. (37)

The 'imitation' does not copy life, but presents its "poetic truth" (38). Therefore, the truth of the drama is a higher truth than that of real life; it is based on an immutable essence, the nature of man, and is therefore always true. The action of real life, depending as it does on the imperfect

individual and the vagaries of chance, is as variable as those two elements. Hence the false position of those who claim that they are presenting reality when they chronicle the sordid adventures of an individual. This is realism; true fiction is reality.

Not only is the dramatic 'imitation' better than real life, but it also 'tends to express the universal'. "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a certain (39) person will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity" (40). Poetry presents human nature and human nature is universal; the poet 'imitates' not the individual, the singular, but the idea of the individual, the universal. The observation of Bywater is pertinent:

Hence it follows that the incidents in the poetic story are not only possible but also always possible, because they are such as may or must happen at any time, whenever the man and the circumstances are found together. (41)

Consequently, the drama presents in the concrete a law of life which philosophy would phrase in abstract terms. For example, the philosopher, from his observation of individuals, might formulate the truth that 'inordinate ambition' leads to ruin'; Shakespeare fashioned a life - that of Macbeth - in which the working out of this law is seen more clearly and logically than it is in real life. The 'imitation', therefore, corresponds to the idea. It must not be thought, however, that the poet starts



from the abstract idea and tries to fashion a particular story to exemplify it. That is the process of allegory. Rather, the imagination of the poet presents to him a concrete case which, because of its perfect human causality, corresponds to the idea.

It is only when the varied elements of the artist's experience have fused themselves into a unity by having a well-motivated beginning, middle, and end that the mind feels the beauty of its vision. (42)

From what has been said concerning the nature of dramatic 'imitation' it is evident that the two elements which are utterly at variance with it are chance and unmotivated action. The probability or necessity of the sequence is the very essence of the 'imitation'; whatever violates this tends to destroy its value as an ideal and universal representation of life. Chance, by its very definition, is unpredictable and is the very antithesis of the logical sequence which renders the action of the drama universal. A thing that happens by chance is in no sense probable or necessary; it is decidedly individual and hence has no place in the realm of art. In the field of human action unmotivated activity, or action that is not sufficiently motivated, falls under the head of chance; for, when there is no apparent cause for an action it is justly ascribed to chance.

## NOTES

1. "For Plato the non-sensual nature of things is the only true reality, which is to be distinguished from their sensual phenomena. The Ideas are for him not mere things of thought, as Antisthenes considered them to be, but realities. There are ideas of everything possible: not merely of things, but of qualities too, and relations and activities; not only of natural things, but of the products of art, and not only of valuable things but of bad and worthless things. .... All learning and knowledge consists in the recollection by the soul of the ideas when it perceives the things of sense". Eduard Zeller, Outlines Of The History Of Greek Philosophy, p. 130.
2. Benjamin Jowett, The Republic of Plato (Translated), p. 306.
3. Cf. William Turner, History Of Philosophy, p. 132 for a brief and accurate summary of Aristotle's Logic.
4. Ibid., p. 137. Much of this matter is taken from Turner's explanation of Aristotle's theory of matter and form.
5. Ibid., p. 133.
6. Ibid., p. 138.
7. S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory Of Poetry And Fine Art, p. 128.
8. Ibid., p. 153.
9. Poetics, 1451b 6-7.
10. Ibid., 1461b 10.
11. Ibid., 1459b 35.
12. S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory Of Poetry And Fine Art, p. 160.
13. Ibid., p. 151.
14. Antigone, L.332. All translations of the plays of

Sophocles are by F. Storr, Sophocles. Loeb Classical Library.

15. Poetics, 1450a 17 <ὁ δὲ βίος> ἐν πράξει ἐστίν.
16. Ibid., 1447b 30 μιμοῦνται οἱ μιμούμενοι πράττοντας.
17. "Margoliouth's phrase, "a chapter of life", illuminates the meaning, since it includes what the hero does and what happens to him."  
W. Hamilton Fyfe, Translation Of The Poetics Of Aristotle, Loeb Classical Library, p. 22 - commentary on 1449b 24.
18. S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory Of Poetry And Fine Art, p. 138.
19. Poetics, 1448a 20-24.
20. S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory Of Poetry And Fine Art, p. 138.
21. Poetics, 1449b 24-27.
22. Ibid., 1451a 38-39.
23. Ibid., 1450a 4-5:- λέγω γὰρ μῦθον τοῦτον, τὴν σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων.
24. Ibid., 1451a 12:- κατὰ τὸ εἶκος ἢ τὸ ἀναγκάσιον.
25. J. W. H. Atkins, Literary Criticism In Antiquity, Vol. I, p. 88.
26. Poetics, 1452a 21-22.
27. Ibid., 1451b 33-35.
28. Cf. S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory Of Poetry And Fine Art, p. 354.
29. Elisabeth Woodbridge, The Drama - Its Law And Its Technique, p. xiii.
30. Francis P. Donnelly, S.J., Art Principles In Literature, p. 12.
31. Ibid., p. 16.
32. Poetics, 1451a 34-36.

33. Ibid., 1550b 26-35.
34. Ingram Bywater, Aristotle On the Art Of Poetry, p. 187 - commentary on 1451a 36.
35. Poetics, 1461b 10.
36. Ibid., 1451a 39 - 1451b 5.
37. Francis P. Donnelly, S.J., Art Principles In Literature, p. 137.
38. Cf. Elisabeth Woodbridge, The Drama - Its Law And Its Technique, p. 1 - "In the light of such passages, the word "Imitation" takes on another significance from that we might at first be inclined to give it ..... and it seems better to substitute the broader term, "poetic truth"."
39. The word employed by Aristotle is the indefinite adjective τῆς. Butcher translates this word "of a certain type". Although this is a possible rendition, the more literal translation "a certain person" seems preferable.
40. Poetics, 1451b 5-9.
41. Ingram Bywater, Aristotle On The Art Of Poetry, p. 187: commentary on 1451a 36.
42. Francis P. Donnelly, S.J., Art Principles In Literature, p. 137.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DRAMATIC VALIDITY OF PROPHECY

In Chapter One we have seen that tragedy, to be an 'imitation' of life, must be constructed according to certain definite principles. It is the purpose of this chapter to examine the prophecies in the plays of Sophocles in the light of those principles. In this section, therefore, we shall investigate the dramatic validity of prophecy.

THE PROBLEM      Prophecy, in general, may be defined as the announcement of truths which cannot be known by man in a natural way. Thus, distant events which are beyond the ken of man, past events of which there is no record or knowledge, and future events which depend upon the will of man or of a supra-natural agent - all fall within the scope of prophecy. Although in its popular sense the word prophecy is restricted to future events, it is used here in its wider, but proper sense which also includes past and distant events. Since such knowledge cannot be attained by the natural faculties of man, prophecy evidently constitutes an intellectual miracle. Therefore, it supposes a supra-natural intelligence which communicates this knowledge to the person or persons who announce the events.

In the theology of the ancient Greek religion the anthropomorphic gods, to whom was attributed "the power of seeing all things" (1) were the ultimate source of prophecy. The channels through which they communicated their prophetic knowledge to men were the oracles and the soothsayers. The former were shrines of the gods where men could propose their questions to the deity through his official servants and from these latter receive the response of the god, the 'oracle'. The latter were gifted men who received their insight into the future either by direct inspiration of the gods or through the 'art' of divination. These institutions of prognostication were of ancient origin and were thriving even at the time of Homer as Tyler points out:

Prophets hear the voice of the gods, know their will, and thus are acquainted with the past, the present, and the future. Guided by Zeus and Apollo, they are competent to guide the affairs of men. The oracles at Dodona and Delphi already exist in the Homeric age, and individuals and nations go to them to learn the will of the gods. (2)

In the tragedies of the Greeks we have ample evidence that the dramatists availed themselves freely of this element of religious belief and wove the prophecies of the oracles and soothsayers into the pattern of their plots.

Now, if Aristotle were questioned concerning the dramatic validity of this element, it is certain that he would not have excluded it on the grounds that the prophecies involve anthropomorphic gods who never did and never could exist. He was probably the first to grasp the fundamental notion that poetry

deals not with fact but with fiction. In his Poetics (3) he states that it is perfectly legitimate for the poet to take as the basis of his story an impossible supposition - which he calls a  $\pi\rho\omega\tau\omicron\nu\ \psi\epsilon\upsilon\delta\omicron\varsigma$  - provided that the sequence which is built on that assumption follows rationally. For example, a poet might postulate as an initial assumption the fancy that all men have wings; granting him this  $\pi\rho\omega\tau\omicron\nu\ \psi\epsilon\upsilon\delta\omicron\varsigma$ , Aristotle would merely demand that the action portrayed be such as would be natural to winged men. The story, he would say, is evidently impossible ( $\xi\delta\acute{\omicron}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\nu$ ), but, under the assumption, it is not improbable ( $\xi\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\nu$ ) and hence is a true 'imitation'. Therefore, to return to the matter in question, it might be taken as an initial assumption that there are anthropomorphic gods and that they prophesy to men through oracles and soothsayers. Hence, mere lack of conformity with fact does not invalidate the prophecies of the Greek tragedies.

If Aristotle, however, would not exclude Greek prophecy because it was impossible, he would certainly condemn it if it rendered the action improbable. It has been demonstrated in the first chapter that the very essence of the dramatic 'imitation' is the causal sequence of human motivation. When each incident of the plot follows the preceding one as its probable or necessary human consequence then only is the conclusion the logical outcome of the original situation, then only is the plot one whole action which is an ideal and universal reproduction of life as it ought to be according to the nature of

man. If certain incidents in the plot are uncaused or are caused by some agency extrinsic to the human will, then the plot is no longer a presentation of the universal and ideal in human life, but merely a chronicle of an individual's experiences and justly merits Plato's condemnation of a 'copy'. Without any hesitation, then, it can be said that Aristotle's norm for judging the dramatic validity of prophecy would be its relation to the essential chain of human causality.

Now, there seems to be a strong antecedent probability that prophecy does violate the dramatic sequence. The very concept of prophecy implies that the gods, through the medium of oracles and soothsayers, communicate to man a knowledge which he could not attain by natural means. Therefore, by its very nature, prophecy involves the gods in the action of the drama. But Aristotle explicitly condemned that other element of Greek tragedy which involved the gods in the action, namely, the deus ex machina.<sup>(4)</sup> Not infrequently a personal part in the play was assigned to a god who addressed the other characters from the 'machina', "a crane-like contrivance for swinging out a deity, who would thus appear in mid air" <sup>(5)</sup>. In this part which the gods played from the 'machina' Aristotle saw a violation of the causal sequence. Still, there would seem to be little difference between this and prophecy - in the former the gods address men in person, in the latter they speak to them through oracles and soothsayers. if the 'deus ex machina' violates the causal sequence, why does not prophecy also ?



It is the answer to that question which we shall seek in the following pages. In the first place, we shall try to learn why the 'deus ex machina' violates the dramatic causality in Sophocles; having established that, we shall be in a position to see whether prophecy falls under the same condemnation.

'DEUS EX MACHINA' In the seven extant plays of Sophocles there  
IN  
SOPHOCLES are two instances of the 'deus ex machina':

Athena in the Ajax and Heracles in the Philoctetes (6). Significantly enough, those two occur in plays treating of the Trojan war - a time when the gods mingled freely with their warrior sons, if Homer is to be believed. For the purpose of our study it will be sufficient to examine the part which Heracles plays in the Philoctetes since that is a typical example of the 'deus ex machina' of the Greek tragedies.

Nine years before the play begins the Greek warrior Philoctetes had been cruelly marooned on a desert island by the Greek chieftains because of a noisome wound which he had suffered on the voyage to Troy, a wound which had made him an object of disgust to the host. In his possession, however, he had retained the miraculous bow and arrows which had been given to him by Heracles. During the siege of Troy the prophet Helenus declared to the Greeks that they would never take the city until they had brought to their assistance Philoctetes and his renowned bow. This work was undertaken by the wily Odysseus who persuaded the youthful Neoptolemus, son of Achilles who had

been the closest friend of Philoctetes, to accompany and aid him. When the play opens we find Odysseus outlining the 'modus agendi' for Neoptolemus: the latter is to make known to Philoctetes that he is the son of Achilles and, under the pretext of conveying the sufferer to his home in Greece, is to get him aboard the ship; once aboard he will be sped to Troy, even against his will. Neoptolemus rebels against this double-dealing but for the sake of the warring Achaians reluctantly consents. The stratagem succeeds to the extent that Neoptolemus gains possession of the precious bow and arrows, but when he declines to restore them and confesses the true state of affairs, Philoctetes is adamant in his refusal to accompany the youth and aid the Greeks who had treated him so badly. Neoptolemus and Odysseus are about to depart without him when the former, moved by the sufferings of Philoctetes and overcome with shame at his part in the transaction, restores the bow and arrows and agrees, sincerely this time, to return to Greece with the afflicted warrior. When they are setting out for the boat, however, an unexpected incident occurs which completely reverses their intentions - the demi-god Heracles appears to them, bearing a command from Zeus:

Go not yet till thou has heard  
Son of Poeas, first my word:  
Heracles to thee appears,  
His: the voice that thrills thine ears.  
'Tis for thy sake I have come,  
Leaving my Olympian home.  
Mandate from high Zeus I bring  
To forbid thy journeying:  
Hear the will of heaven's King.  
.....

.....  
Go with yon man to Ilium. There first  
Thou shalt be healed of thy grievous sore;  
Then, chosen as the champion of the host,  
With these my arrows thou shalt pierce  
                    to the heart  
Paris, guilty cause of all that woe. (7)

With such an explicit order from the gods there is little left for Philoctetes to do except to put aside his wrath and join his former comrades in the storming of the leagured city. And so all is well because of "the god at whose decree all was ordered" (8).

Two things must be noted about this appearance of Heracles. In the first place, as an incident of the plot, it can in no sense be said to be the probable human consequence of what has gone before. The appearance of Heracles certainly does not evolve out of the will of the characters, but is something injected 'ab extrinseco'. It is an arbitrary element which is neither probable nor necessary in the course of the human action. In the second place, it diverts the natural course of the action and thereby brings about a conclusion which is not the probable or necessary result of the initial situation according to the characters of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus.

It is through the intervention of the deified Heracles that the aim with which Odysseus and Neoptolemus came to Lemnos - to secure Philoctetes and his bow for the final overthrow of Troy - gains its fulfillment. Apart from that intervention the issue would have been far other than that contemplated at the outset of the action. (9)

If the story had been allowed to run its natural course, the logical conclusion would have been the departure of both

Philoctetes and Neoptolemus for Greece. But Zeus, through Heracles, commands otherwise and so the action is directed to an unnatural conclusion.

From this characteristic example of the 'deus ex machina' it can readily be seen why the gods violate the causal sequence when they are introduced into the action as personal agents. Their appearances, being independent of human causality, are uncaused incidents; their commands, suppressing free play of human motivation, cause the denouement. Therefore, the 'deus ex machina' in the Greek tragedy was a miraculous means of extrinsic determination and as such was condemned by Aristotle:

It is therefore evident that the unravelling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the 'Deus ex Machina'. .....  
.... Within the action there must be nothing irrational. If the irrational cannot be excluded, it should be outside the scope of the tragedy. (10)

It is from this usage of the Greek tragedians that the expression 'deus ex machina' has come to signify any irrational element in fiction which is used to turn the action to the desired conclusion.

The Greek tragedian, however, had much more reason for employing the 'machina' than have modern dramatists for introducing similar devices. By a tradition that was almost iron bound he was forced to draw his story from the accepted legends of the people; therefore the conclusion was predetermined and well known to his audience.

The tragic poet hardly ever invents his fable. His duty is to present in the concrete, with living power, an action of which some lineaments are already given in legend or tradition. It was only when the great period of Hellenic tragedy was past that such an elegant caprice could be attempted as the Flower of Agathon ..... The taste for novelty, to which such a poem appealed, would be attributed by lovers of Aeschylus to the degeneracy of the contemporary theatre. A good reason for the preference of known subjects is assigned by Aristotle:- "What is possible is credible, and what once happened was clearly possible". (11)

The dramatist, therefore, took the legend and transfused it with his own personality; it was his function to work out a sequence of events which would inevitably lead to the conclusion determined by the legend. That was a matter of history which could not be changed; it would be an intolerable travesty of fact for Sophocles to represent Philoctetes and Neoptolemus as departing for their homes when every school-boy knew that the bow of Philoctetes was an important factor in the taking of Troy. Consequently, when the dramatist found his plot logically tending towards a conclusion other than that required by legend, his only avenue of escape was the 'machina'.

The Philoctetes is the only play of Sophocles in which the 'denouement' is effected by the intervention of a god, the 'deus ex machina'. Another ending was hardly possible after the manner in which the poet had emphasized Philoctetes' unyielding nature. (12)

In spite of the necessity induced by the legendary source of the fables (of which Aristotle approved), the philosopher had little patience with a use of the 'machina' and declares that, if the story is such that it must be used, it would be better

for such a story not to be written (13).

PROPHECY      It is evident that prophecy will fall under the  
IN  
SOPHOCLES      condemnation of the 'deus ex machina' as a violation of the causal sequence if 1) it is an un-caused incident in the tragedies, that is, an event which does not spring from the human will in the natural course of the action; and 2) if, as a locution of the gods, it causes the subsequent action, so that what follows represents not the will of the characters, but the will of the gods. An 'a priori' consideration of the nature of prophecy would seem to indicate that it does fulfill both of these conditions since 1) it is a miracle, and therefore above the human will; and 2) it is a pronouncement of the gods who, as supreme rulers, can demand obedience from men. The question, however, cannot be settled 'a priori', but must be answered by an examination of the prophecies which occur in the tragedies of Sophocles. There are ten prophecies in his plays - one or more occurring in each of the tragedies - but for the purpose of our investigation two or three examples will be sufficient. These will be taken from two plays which were special favorites of Aristotle, namely, the Oedipus Tyrannus and the Antigone.

a) The Oedipus Tyrannus. As the play begins we find the city of Thebes suffering from a dire plague. A group of the Theban elders has gathered before the palace of the king, Oedipus, to implore him to take steps to bring their sufferings to an end. Oedipus replies that the plight of his people has

caused him great anguish and that he has already taken steps  
to learn the cause of the disaster:

Thus pondering one clue of hope I caught,  
And tracked it up; I have sent Menoeceus' son,  
Creon, my consort's brother, to inquire  
Of Pythian Phoebus at his Delphic shrine,  
How I might save the State by act or word. (14)

Scarcely has he finished speaking when Creon enters bearing a  
message from the oracle:

Let me report then all the god declared.  
King Phoebus bids us straitly extirpate  
A fell pollution that infests the land,  
And no more harbour an inveterate sore. (15)

It is the unpunished murderer of the former king Laius, he ex-  
plains, who pollutes the land by his presence and causes the  
plague; this assassin must be found and brought to justice.  
But who is the murderer of Laius? In his perplexity Oedipus  
appeals to the seer Teiresias for aid:

Chorus

My liege, if any man sees eye to eye  
With our lord Phoebus, 'tis our prophet, lord  
Teiresias; he of all men best might guide  
A searcher of this matter to the light.

Oedipus

Here too my zeal has nothing lagged, for twice  
At Creon's instance have I sent to fetch him,  
And long I marvel why he is not here. (16)

When the prophet finally comes he is unwilling to make known  
the murderer, but at length, goaded to anger by Oedipus, he  
divulges his heaven-sent knowledge:

I say thou art the murderer of the man  
Whose murderer thou pursuest. (17)

Oedipus, unaware of such a crime, denounces the prophet as a  
fraud and attributes his statement to the prompting of Creon

whom he suspects of aspiring to the crown of Thebes. As the play progresses, however, it is brought home to Oedipus that in truth he is the murderer; many years before, in a road-side fight, he had slain a man whom the subsequent incidents of the play clearly prove to have been Laius. Thus the curses which Oedipus had called down upon the head of the assassin of the king fall upon himself.

b) The Antigone. Antigone, daughter of the late Oedipus, defies an edict of the reigning sovereign Creon and gives ritual burial to the body of Polyneices, her brother, who had been slain in an attack on Thebes. When she is apprehended by the guards and brought before Creon she justifies her act by appealing to the eternal laws of right and wrong which are superior to any law of man. Angered by her defiance, Creon decrees that she shall be buried alive in a cavern dug in the rock. The pleadings of Haemon, his son, who was to marry Antigone, fall upon deaf ears and the youth threatens to die with her. When Antigone has been led out to her death chamber and Haemon has left in anger, the blind prophet Teiresias, guided by an attendant, comes to Creon to remonstrate with him:

O King, thy wilful temper ails the State,  
For all our shrines and altars are profaned  
By what has filled the maw of dogs and crows,  
The flesh of Oedipus' unburied son.  
Therefore the angry gods abominate  
Our litanies and our burnt offerings. (18)

The body of Polyneices, he says, must be given full burial and Antigone must be released from her tomb. When the king re-



fuses to do these things, the prophet predicts the dire consequences of his stubbornness:

Know then for sure, the coursers of the sun  
Not many times shall run their race, before  
Thou shalt have given the fruit of thine own  
loins  
In quittance of thy murder, life for life;  
.....  
And now, consider whether bought by gold  
I prophesy. (19)

Too late Creon repents himself of his stubbornness; when he hastens to the cave he finds Antigone has hanged herself. In an excess of grief Haemon upbraids his father for his deed and then throws himself upon his sword. When the king returns to the city he finds that the cup of his misery has been filled to the brim; his wife Eurydice, having heard of the death of her son has taken her life.

The Prophecies In These Plays. In these two tragedies there are three prophecies. In the Oedipus Tyrannus both the oracle and the seer divulge information which the characters are unable to know in a natural way. Teiresias in the Antigone predicts a future event which takes place precisely as he foretold it. Therefore, in each of these incidents we have the gods involved as the efficient causes of preternatural events. These preternatural incidents, however, do not violate the causal sequence for the following reasons:

1) The prophecies are caused incidents. To understand how prophecy can be caused by the will of man it is necessary to understand the Greek concept of oracles and soothsayers. In the popular belief the gods communicated information through

the oracles and prophets, not merely now and again, but habitually - and, in the case of the oracles, upon request ! This idea flowed logically from their concept of the gods; for, if the gods were like men in all things except power and knowledge, what could be more natural than that there should be some regular means of communication between the Olympians and their lesser counterparts ?

There arose as total result of the situation, the need for an easy and quick access to divine authority, to a revelation, in brief, or to a dogmatically infallible teacher. The figure of Zeus was remote, but not so was his son and the confidant of his counsels. For the belief of all the Greeks held that at Delphi in Phocis the spirit of Apollo emanated from the sacred cavern and answered questions. (20)

In Greek life, then, the remarkable powers of the oracles and soothsayers were taken for granted. They were accepted as established religious institutions, a sort of telephone system which was available to any individual or group which wished to use it. This commonplace nature of oracles in Greek life is testified by the "Oracle Inscriptions Discovered at Dodona", as E. S. Roberts points out in his article on that subject:

The examination has established a new proof of the considerable part which the consultation of the oracle played in the public and private life of the ancient Greeks ..... Aptly confirming the testimony of authors to the wide-spread fame of the oracle, these haphazard survivals depict for us as seeking the help of the god, not only the simple peasant of the neighborhood, but members of other Greek communities far and near. (21)

Since this is the nature of the oracles and prophets it can readily be seen how the prophecies in the Oedipus and in the

Antigone are not unforeseen incidents, but are brought about naturally by the sequence of human motivation. The recourse of Oedipus to the Delphic oracle for aid in his dilemma is not only natural but almost imperative. Teiresias, in the Oedipus, has already received enlightenment from the god with respect to the true state of affairs before he becomes involved in the action, but he does not divulge his knowledge until he has been goaded to anger by the king - his prophecy then is a natural human reaction to a motive. In the Antigone the blind prophet despairs of moving Creon by any other means and, as a threat, predicts his future misery which the gods have made known to the seer. Thus, it can be seen that prophecy fits naturally into the course of the human action. It never happens by chance, but is always effected by human motivation. Therefore it does not fall under the same condemnation as the 'deus ex machina' on the score of being an uncaused incident in the action.

2) The prophecies do not cause the sequel. The reason for this lies in the very nature of prophecy. Although it is true that the pronouncements of the oracles and the declarations of the gods who appear on the 'machina' are the same in so far as they are both divine messages, still they are essentially different with respect to the nature of the message which is communicated. When the gods appear in person they issue commands; when they speak through oracles and soothsayers they supply information. That information may pertain to the past,

the present, or the future, but it is always of a practical nature. It is given to men not as a sign of divine authority, but as a means of self-guidance in the management of their affairs.

The fundamental difference between the conception of revelation in Greek religion and in Christianity lies in the fact that the Greeks ..... formed their notions of the divine character by making the gods in their own image, and looked to special revelation only as the source of practical guidance. (22)

Prophecy, therefore, is not an exercise of the supreme sovereignty of the gods, but a manifestation of their omniscience; it is an ordinary service which the obliging Olympians render to mortals. In this function the gods are little more than well informed weather-forecasters who can be consulted by means of the oracular telephone.

In circumstances of importance or embarrassment the confiding Greek had recourse to the omniscient deity and sought from him the means of succeeding in very much the same way, to use Mr. Carapano's simile, as we now consult a lawyer or a physician. (23)

Since this is the nature of Greek prophecy, it is manifest that it does not cause the subsequent action in the drama. The gods stand by, ready to supply information, but they do not interfere with the human agents by imposing upon them the necessity of embracing a definite course of action. Everything works out according to the human nature of the characters. The dishonor and ruin which fall upon Oedipus are not brought about by the announcements of the oracle and the prophet, but are the natural outcome of the situation in which the king is uncon-

sciously involved at the beginning of the play. The gods, through the oracle and the prophet, merely furnish the facts which he requests; their role is practically equivalent to that of a lawyer in a modern play. Far from imposing a necessary course of action, they allow great freedom; Oedipus even spurns the services of Teiresias - and later, to his sorrow, learns how true were the words. In the Antigone the blind prophet announces the suffering which is about to fall upon Creon; everything happens as he said, but not because he said it. The deaths of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice are brought about not by the gods but by the passions of the persons involved. Speaking of the plays of Sophocles, Campbell says:

Given the character and the situation, all seems to come inevitably. The persons are their fates. The gods have hidden themselves, even as the poet hides his art. The only "celestial machinery" is afforded by the soothsayer, a familiar personage of Greek life, who reveals, but does not cause, the sequel. (24)

Prophecy, then, does not effect the complication of the denouement; it is the mere relation of an event and not the cause of it.

It might be objected, however, that pre-knowledge implies pre-determination; therefore, a drama in which prophecy occurs does not represent the working out of the original situation according to the nature of the characters, but according to the will of the gods. With respect to this argument it must be noted, in the first place, that foreknowledge, in itself, does not imply pre-determination. Of the innumerable courses

which are possible to man it is certain that he will choose one of them. If "to the gods we ascribe the power of seeing all things", that one course of action which the man will freely choose is known to the gods. Therefore, they can predict what it will be without determining it in any way. But even on the false supposition that pre-knowledge does imply pre-determination, prophecy does not vitiate the dramatic 'imitation'. The only thing that the principles of Aristotle demand is that the plot should develop according to a natural human sequence. If the gods work behind the scene, arranging circumstances so that by human motivation the men come to the end which the gods desire, there is no violation of the causal sequence. It is only when the gods interfere directly to bring about the desired end that the universal nature of the 'imitation' is destroyed. Therefore, the question as to whether prophecy indicates extrinsic determination is a theological, and not a dramatic, difficulty; it has been demonstrated above that it does not constitute extrinsic determination in itself.

CONCLUSION Aristotle condemned the 'deus ex machina' of the Greek tragedies because it was a miraculous means of extrinsic determination and therefore a violation of the causal sequence. The appearances of the gods, being independent of human motivation, came under the category of 'chance'; the commands of the gods brought about an arbitrary conclusion which did not flow naturally from the original situation. Prophecy also involved the gods, but in a different role. Their

locutions were not 'miracles', but probable or necessary events in the course of the action which depended upon the will of the characters; their messages were not imperative, but informative; hence they did not cause the denouement. The oracles and prophets constituted a religious apparatus which could be consulted at will and hence were a more or less constant element. Therefore, prophecy in the Greek tragedies, being a natural means of self-guidance, does not fall under Aristotle's condemnation of the 'deus ex machina' as a violation of the sequence of human motivation. It is a valid element in the dramatic 'imitation'.

## NOTES

1. Poetics, 1454b 5-6:- ἅπαντα γὰρ ἀποδίδομεν τοῖς θεοῖς ὁρᾶν.
2. W. S. Tyler, Theology Of The Greek Poets, p. 158.
3. Poetics, 1460a 18-26.
4. Ibid., 1454a 37 - 1454b 8.
5. Richard G. Moulton, The Ancient Classical Drama, p. 127.
6. Ajax, Ll. 1-133; Philoctetes, Ll. 1408-1451.
7. Philoctetes, Ll. 1408-1427.
8. Ibid., Ll. 1467-1468.
9. Marshall Macgregor, Leaves Of Hellas, p. 112.
10. Poetics, 1454a 37 - 1454b 7.
11. Lewis Campbell, A Guide To Greek Tragedy, p. 60.
12. A. W. Verall, The Student's Manual Of Greek Tragedy, p. 160.
13. Poetics, 1460a 33-34.
14. Oedipus Tyrannus, Ll. 68-72.
15. Ibid., Ll. 95-98.
16. Ibid., Ll. 284-289.
17. Ibid., Ll. 362.
18. Antigone, Ll. 1015-1020.
19. Ibid., Ll. 1064-1068.
20. George C. Ring, S.J., Gods Of The Gentiles, p. 211.
21. E. S. Roberts, "Oracle Inscriptions Discovered At Dodona", Journal Of Hellenic Studies I, p. 211.
22. Arthur Fairbanks, A Handbook Of Greek Religion, p. 39.



23. E. S. Roberts, "Oracle Inscriptions Discovered At Dodona", Journal Of Hellenic Studies I, p. 228.
24. Lewis Campbell, A Guide To Greek Tragedy, p. 152.

## CHAPTER THREE

### TRAGIC VALUE OF PROPHECY

We are now in a position to advance a step further in our evaluation of the prophecies of the Greek tragedy according to the principles of Aristotle. In the last chapter we have seen that prophecy does not violate the basic principle of 'imitation', namely, the causal sequence and is, therefore, a legitimate element in the tragedy. This conclusion, however is purely negative. We must now consider prophecy from another point of view and try to learn whether it has any positive value for the tragic action. That is the purpose of this chapter.

NATURE OF TRAGIC ACTION	Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one another in three respects, - the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct. (1)
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Although both tragedy and comedy are the same with respect to the medium they employ (language) and the manner of representation (action) they differ with respect to the nature of the action which is reproduced. Comedy is an 'imitation' of a light action, tragedy is a reproduction of a serious action.

Consequently, the emotional effect which the sight of the action produces on the spectator differs according to each form; in other words, the function of tragedy is not the same as that of comedy.

When Aristotle comes to define tragic action he does not attempt an essential definition but rather describes it by its effects. His definition is inductive, the fruit of observation and reflection. Tragedies, he says "imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation" (2). Therefore, the proper object of tragedy is a sequence of incidents which are pitiful ( $\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\epsilon\iota\nu\acute{\alpha}$ ) and terrible ( $\phi\omicron\theta\epsilon\rho\acute{\alpha}$ ), and the more intense is the pity and fear which they excite the more tragic is the action. Just as the causal sequence was Aristotle's norm for judging the dramatic validity of an incident, so its efficacy to inspire those two emotions is his standard for estimating its tragic value. Any incident which heightens the pity and fear is a decided asset to the tragic action.

"As the sequel to what has already been said, we must proceed to consider ..... by what means the specific effect of Tragedy will be produced". (3). From a comparison of the Greek tragedies Aristotle describes the type of plot which he considers best suited to inspire the emotions of pity and fear. In general the best tragedies are those which represent the inevitable progress of a man from prosperity to adversity. The protagonist, however, should not be an utter villain, for

his downfall would not excite pity and fear, but would merely satisfy our moral sense; nor should the tragic hero be an extremely virtuous man since his adversity would not be tragic but shocking. "There remains, then, the character between these two extremes, - that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some ..... frailty" (4). The tragic hero, then, should be a strong, but imperfect, character whose adversity is the inevitable result of some short-coming. Since he is a man like ourselves we pity him in his suffering and struggle against the inevitable downfall; when we see how one step leads logically to the next and how all tend towards a catastrophe we are fearful because of the evil which is imminent and inevitable.

Such a change of fortune, then, is essential to every tragedy and constitutes the tragic action. Depending upon the incidents which are portrayed, however, the plots of the various plays are capable of exciting pity and fear in different degrees. An examination of the plays in which prophecies occur reveals the fact that the prophecies render the change of fortune from prosperity to adversity more pitiful and fearful and are, therefore, valuable elements in the tragic action. They are a source of tragic effect which is characteristic of the Greek drama. A consideration of the plays of Sophocles shows that the prophecies: 1) provide the tragic 'hamartia'; 2) establish a tragic situation; 3) furnish an element of surprise;

4) generate suspense; 5) accelerate the catastrophe. Let us consider each of these in detail.

PROPHECY AND 'HAMARTIA' Aristotle, as we have seen above, considered that the catastrophe in the tragic action should be the result of some 'frailty' on the part of the protagonist. The word which he uses is *ἁμαρτία*. In his commentary on the Poetics Butcher explains (5) that this word may have three meanings: 1) an unintentional error arising from a want of knowledge; 2) a moral failing when the fault or error is conscious and intentional, but not deliberate; and 3) an habitual defect in character. The frailty, therefore, may be a weakness of the intellect or of the will which is natural to man. An error of judgment no less than a moral fault may, by a natural sequence of human motivation, lead a man to ruin. As a matter of fact, an intellectual error would seem to be a more potent means of inspiring pity and fear since it springs naturally from man's limited ability to understand, and the catastrophe which follows upon it is even less deserved than is one which comes from a weakness of the will.

It has been explained in Chapter Two (6) that, among the Greeks, oracles and prophets were natural means of obtaining information concerning the administration of practical affairs. Since this is the nature of prophecy and since tragic action can readily arise from an intellectual error, the value of this element of Greek religion to the tragedian is evident. A mistake in the interpretation of an oracle or the pronouncement of

a soothsayer presents a natural 'hamartia'.

Oracles present an inevitable future in terms that are dim, ambiguous, equivocal, ironical; the dimness lessens as the issue advances, but the clear meaning or true rendering is only apparent when the fulfilment is entirely accomplished. (7)

The prophecies provide information which is infallibly true, but owing to the natural limitations of the human intellect man fails to understand them in their right light and undertakes a course of action which will inevitably lead him to his doom. His frantic, and frequently blind, struggle to escape the consequences of his fatal mistake constitute an action which is truly tragic. From this source spring the tragic emotions which are inspired by the Oedipus Tyrannus and the Trachiniae of Sophocles.

a) The Oedipus Tyrannus. The actual play presents merely the denouement of the whole action. In the mind of the Greek audience the incidents which are presupposed were no less a part of the play than the action which was put on the boards. Therefore, the true 'hamartia' of the play is the mistake which Oedipus makes in the interpretation of an oracle. When as a youth Oedipus appeals to Delphi for advice he is told that he will kill his father some time in the future. He believes that his father is Polybus, the king of Corinth, by whom he has been raised from infancy; to avoid the catastrophe which the oracle predicts he shuns Corinth and goes to Thebes. That is his fatal step; for there he kills Laius, his true father, whom he had never known. Thus, due to his intellectual error, the very

means which he employs to avoid the prediction of the oracle bring about its fulfillment. In the play itself we are shown the steps by which he learns his fatal error and the subsequent ruin which it brings upon him.

b) The Trachiniae. In this play also a mistake in the interpretation of a prophecy is the 'hamartia' which precipitates the catastrophe. Fifteen years before the action of the play begins a centaur whom Heracles had slain had predicted to Deianeira, the wife of the hero, that the blood which flowed from his wound would be a charm over the affections of the fickle Heracles:

Thus shalt thou have a charm to bind the heart  
Of Heracles, and never shall he look  
On wife or maid to lover her more than thee. (8)

As the play opens Deianeira has grave reasons for thinking that the time has come to test the truth of the prediction of the centaur. However, when she avails herself of this charm to win back the waning love of the adventurous Heracles she finds that, although the prediction was true, it bore a far different meaning than that which she had ascribed to it; for the blood of the centaur inflicts an agonizing death on her husband - so that indeed he never looked upon another.

Such fatal mistakes give rise to the "irony of action" for which Sophocles is justly famous:

Another characteristic of Sophocles is that famous "tragic irony" by which again he imparts new power to old themes ..... Between the audience which foresees the event and the stage personages who cannot, the playwright sets up a thrilling interest of suspense. He causes his

characters to discuss the future they expect in language which is fearful and exquisitely suitable to the future which actually awaits them. (9)

Just as an orator employs irony in speech so the tragedians of Greece used the prophecies to render the downfall of the protagonist ironical and therefore more pitiful and terrible. The characters put one interpretation on the prophecy, but its true meaning is entirely different. Then, either by opposing or following their own interpretation they bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy in its true sense. The man learns the true interpretation only at the end when he is ruined, but it is known throughout by the spectators who pity him and fear for his welfare.

#### PROPHECY AND TRAGIC SITUATION

Akin to its use as the occasion of the 'hamartia', but somewhat different, is another function of prophecy. Since oracles and soothsayers were natural means of obtaining information their pronouncements were apt means of providing a tragic situation at the outset of the play. A prophecy by either an oracle or a seer, referring to the unknown past, present, or future, puts the characters in possession of the necessary facts and leads them to adopt a certain course of action. Examples of this function of prophecy are found in the Oedipus At Colonus, the Electra, and the Philoctetes.

a) The Oedipus At Colonus. The blind Oedipus, having arrived at a grove dedicated to the Furies, recalls an oracle which predicted that he would find rest under their protection.



From the king of Athens, in whose domain the grove is situated, he obtains permission to remain there. Then his daughter Ismene arrives bearing news of a recent oracle from Delphi:

Ismene

Thy country (so it runs) shall yearn in time  
To have thee for their weal alive or dead.

Oedipus

And who could gain by such a one as I ?

Ismene

On thee, 'tis said, their sovereignty depends. (10)

According to this later oracle, then, the faction at Thebes which procured Oedipus would gain the upper hand in the struggle for supremacy. On these two oracles the rest of the action depends. From the ancient oracle arises the firm determination of Oedipus to remain at Athens and finish out his days in peace according to the prediction of the god; in accord with the later oracle Polyneices and Creon strive to win him to their side so that with them will rest the sovereignty of Thebes. As Croiset notes, the whole of the tragic action depends upon the oracles:

Et, de même, la légende d'Oedipe à Colone n'aurait pas été une matière de tragédie, si Oedipe ne connaissait sa destinée, s'il ne l'acceptait avec des sentiments de joie et de fierté, et si, d'un bout à l'autre du drame, il ne s'attachait à l'accomplir en dépit des résistances. (11)

b) The Electra. In this play Orestes goes to the Delphic oracle to learn how he should take a 'just' vengeance; the answer of the oracle establishes a situation from which the rest of the story flows:

Know then that when I left thee to consult  
The Pythian oracle and learn how best  
To execute just vengeance for my sire

On those that slew him, Phoebus answered thus:  
Trust not to shields or armed hosts, but steal  
The chance thyself the avenging blow to deal. (12)

The oracle does not command the vengeance - Orestes takes that for granted according to the *lex talionis* - but it does lay down a definite 'modus agendi' which constitutes the tragic plot. The pity and fear which arise from the action are due to the manner of accomplishing this odious vengeance. Moulton has called attention to this function of the oracle in the

Electra:

Sophocles makes the oracle to sketch a dramatic plot, and makes Apollo, so to speak, set Orestes an intrigue as a task. (13)

c) The Philoctetes. Since the plot of this play has already been outlined in Chapter Two it will be sufficient here merely to call attention to the fact that it was because of the prophecy of Helenus that Odysseus and Neoptolemus undertook to bring Philoctetes to Troy; hence it was the prediction of this prophet which gave rise to the entire dramatic situation.

"Ne'er can ye take the citadel of Troy  
Till by persuasion ye have won him over  
And brought him from the island where he bides".  
(14)

The whole plot of the Philoctetes is concerned with the endeavors of Neoptolemus to accomplish this task.

PROPHECY AND  
TRAGIC SURPRISE

But again, tragedy is an imitation  
..... of events inspiring fear  
or pity. Such an effect is best  
produced when the events come on us  
by surprise; and the effect is heightened when,  
at the same time, they follow as cause and  
effect. (15)

A tragedy which presents the unimpeded course of a man from prosperity to adversity is less suited to produce the emotions of pity and fear than is a plot in which the catastrophe is the sudden, unexpected, but probable effect of what has gone before. Due to the sharp contrast of happiness and misery the tragic emotions of pity and fear are accentuated. It is for this reason that Aristotle prefers what he calls the 'complex plot'.

A complex action is one in which the change (from prosperity to adversity) is accompanied by ..... Reversal, or by Recognition or by both. (16)

Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite. (17)

Recognition ..... is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. (18)

In such an action, then, the man at first seems to be victorious against the forces which seek his downfall, but then is suddenly plunged into the catastrophe. There is a complete reversal of the situation within the scope of a single act. However gradual the approach to the catastrophe may be, it seems to the man to happen suddenly; he thinks himself a happy man at the beginning of an act, but he learns the truth of the situation and is a miserable man at the end of it.

In the plays of Sophocles we find such surprises in the action arising from prophecy. The information which it supplies brings the man to a recognition of the true state of affairs and precipitates the catastrophe. The prophecies in the Antigone and in the Ajax are used to effect such a Recognition

and Reversal.

a) The Antigone. At the beginning of the fourth and last act of this play Creon, the king of Thebes, considers himself a happy man who has just acquitted himself of a difficult task in vindicating the laws of the state. He has refused burial to a traitor guilty of high treason, he has punished Antigone for attempting to violate his decree, and he has repulsed the attempts of his son Haemon to shake him in his determination of carrying out his orders. At this point, however, the advent of the soothsayer Teiresias and his prediction of the evil which is about to fall upon the king because of his stubbornness make Creon recognize the true state of affairs. His frantic endeavor to make amends is too late and at the end of the play he is a miserable man who has offended the gods, lost his son, and caused his wife to take her life. Thus, the prophecy of Teiresias brings about a recognition and causes a reversal of situation which is provocative of pity and fear.

b) The Ajax. The head-strong hero of this play, having suffered an humiliating fit of madness through the agency of the avenging goddess Athena, is plunged to the depths of despair when he returns to himself and learns what he has done in his insanity. To the anguish of his wife, Tecmessa, and his companions, the chorus of sailors, he proclaims that only his death can wipe out his shame. Later, however, at the pleading of his wife, he repents himself of this determination and makes known that he has resolved to bury the sword which he had in-

tended to use as the instrument of his death. At this his wife and comrades are over-joyed:

O joy, when Ajax has forgot once more  
His woe, and turns the godhead to adore ! (19)

However, they are soon plunged from happiness to misery. When Ajax has departed to bury his sword a messenger bearing news of a prophecy of the seer Calchas arrives. The humiliated warrior must be kept within his tent for that one day if he is to live:

Chorus

List to this man - the tidings he has brought  
Of Ajax' fortunes, filling me with grief.

Tecmessa

What is thy news, man ? Say, are we undone ?

Messenger

I know not of thy fortunes, only this -  
If Ajax is abroad, I augur ill.

Tecmessa

Alas !. he is. How thy words chill my soul ! (20)

It is then that they recognize the true import of the words of Ajax; he went forth to bury the sword in his side ! Frantically they search for him; they find him dead on the solitary beach, pierced by his own weapon. The prophecy of Calchas is the means which brought them to an understanding of the true state of affairs and at the end of the act their joy has turned to sadness.

PROPHECY Speaking of the best way to excite tragic pity and  
AND  
SUSPENSE fear, Aristotle says:

He (the tragedian) may not indeed destroy the framework of the received legends .... but he ought to show invention of his own, and skilfully handle the traditional material. (21)

He then proceeds to enumerate various methods by which the

poets fashion their material and construct a sequence of events which leads naturally to a catastrophe. He singles out one type of action which he considers most capable of producing the proper tragic effect:

The last case is the best, as when in the Cressphontes Merope is about to slay her son, but, recognising who he is, spares his life. (22)

It is evident that in such a situation as Aristotle sets forth the effect on the audience is one of suspense. This mental state arises when we perceive in a certain set of circumstances the possibility of either a felicitous or a disastrous outcome. Accompanying this perception is a tense emotional state which is a mixture of hope and fear - an effect which is truly proper to the tragedy. In the excitation of suspense the Greek tragedies excell. Since the legendary source of their fables destroyed the possibility of novelty of subject-matter, the tragedians developed this source of tragic effect to perfection. Symonds has summed up in an apt simile the suspense which is characteristic of Greek tragedy:

We seem to be watching a boatful of careless persons gliding down a river, and gradually approaching its fall over a vast cliff. If we take an interest in them, how terrible is our anxiety when they come within the irresistible current of the sliding water, how frightful is their cry of anguish when at last they see the precipice ahead, how horror-stricken is the silence with which they shoot the fall, and are submerged ! Of this nature is the interest of a good Greek tragedy. (23)

In prophecy the tragedians found a splendid instrument by which they could bring about this effect of tragic suspense.

The pronouncements of the oracles and soothsayers put the characters in possession of information which makes it possible for them to escape the catastrophe towards which the events are tending. Examples of this use of prophecy are found in the Ajax, the Antigone, and the Oedipus Tyrannus.

a) The Ajax. The prophet Calchas declares that Ajax will be safe if he remains in his tent for that one day; but the hero has already gone off by himself to bury his sword. There is still the possibility that he may be found and brought back to the camp before disaster has overtaken him. During the frantic search which follows the audience is left in suspense, hoping that he will be discovered in time but fearing that the worst has already happened.

b) The Antigone. In the last act of this play the prophet Teiresias foretells the evils which will fall upon Creon for his obstinacy. This prediction shakes the determination of the king and he decides to make amends before the prophecy of Teiresias is fulfilled:

I go hot-foot. Bestir ye one and all,  
My henchmen ! Get ye axes ! Speed away  
To yonder eminence ! I too will go,  
For all my resolution this way sways. (24)

The very language which Sophocles puts in the mouth of Creon indicates the suspense of the situation. There is a possibility that he will arrive in time, but the audience, knowing the infallibility of the utterances of Teiresias, fear that he will be too late. Hence, they are in suspense while he hastens to the tomb in which he has incarcerated Antigone.

c) The Oedipus Tyrannus. When the king sends for Teiresias and tries to extort from him the name of the murderer of Laius, the situation is one of breathless suspense. The audience knows that Oedipus himself is the guilty party and that Teiresias is aware of that fact. The pertinacity of Oedipus in seeking the truth gives the audience grounds for fearing that he will learn it to his own sorrow; on the other hand, the stubborn refusal of Teiresias to divulge his knowledge provides the hope that the king will, after all, be left in his blissful ignorance. Thus the knowledge of the prophet furnishes material for tragic suspense.

PROPHECY AND  
ACCELERATION  
OF ACTION

In the last chapter of the Poetics Aristotle sets forth a number of arguments to demonstrate the superiority of tragedy over the epic as a literary form. One point in his argumentation is the following:

Moreover, the art attains its end within narrower limits; for the concentrated effect is more pleasurable than one which is spread over a long time and so diluted. (25)

If this is true of all tragedy, it is true of the Greek tragedy in a special manner. Concentration of action is a quality which is peculiarly characteristic of the Greek drama. In it we find none of the side action or pauses of modern drama; the action is concerned with a single issue and runs along rapidly without any lost motion. The result is that the emotions of pity and fear are intensified because of the speed and inevitability with which the catastrophe follows upon the ini-



tial mis-step.

This acceleration of the action is due, in no small degree, to the religious doctrine of practical prophecy. By means of the oracles and soothsayers the characters can be supplied with information which they could not obtain in a natural way without a long process of investigation or without the introduction of an inartistic chance discovery. If the ability of the oracles and seers 'to know all things' is granted, then the tragedian has at hand a means of accelerating the action of the tragedy. In a supra-natural way the oracles and soothsayers have the same role which the messengers of the Greek tragedies have in a natural way. This function of prophecy has been remarked by Campbell in his commentary on the plays of Aeschylus. "In the Prometheus and elsewhere", he says, "prophecy virtually fills the place of the narrative". (26) Through the services of the oracles and soothsayers the unknown past, present, and future are brought to light without any loss of time and without any violation of dramatic probability.

Since this function of prophecy springs from its very nature as a source of practical information, it effects acceleration of action wherever it occurs. Consequently, it will be necessary here merely to note a few instances in which the appeal to prophecy obviates a long process of investigation.

a) The Oedipus Tyrannus. The Delphic oracle informs Oedipus that the cause of the plague is the unpunished murderer of Laius and the prophet Teiresias tells the king that he -

Oedipus - is the assassin. Both of these announcements hasten Oedipus' discovery of his unhappy situation.

b) The Antigone. The soothsayer makes known to Creon the ruin towards which he is hastening and thereby shows him the true state of affairs which would in a natural way be brought home to him only after the passage of some time.

c) The Ajax. The prophecy of Calchas precipitates a search for Ajax and thereby uncovers the fact that the hero has already done away with himself. In the ordinary course of events this fact would be known only after some time or through some chance discovery.

CONCLUSION Aristotle considered that the proper function of the tragedy is to excite the emotions of pity and fear in those who witness or read it. It has been demonstrated in this chapter that prophecy intensifies those effects. Therefore, the logical conclusion is that the philosopher would look upon this element of the Greek tragedy not only as legitimate but also as valuable. He would say that the use of prophecy in a drama rendered the action more tragic. Moreover, since prophecy implies an interest of the gods in the affairs of men it gives to the tragedy that 'high and excellent seriousness' (27) which Aristotle considered proper to that form of the drama.

## NOTES

1. Poetics, 1447a 13-18.
2. Ibid., 1452b 32-33.
3. Ibid., 1452b 28-30.
4. Ibid., 1453a 7-10.
5. S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory Of Poetry And Fine Art, p. 317 ff.
6. Page 44.
7. Richard G. Moulton, The Ancient Classical Drama, p. 103.
8. Trachiniae, Ll. 575-577.
9. Gilbert Norwood, Greek Tragedy, p. 179.
10. Oedipus At Colonus, Ll. 389-392.
11. Alfred and Maurice Croiset, Histoire De La Litterature Grecque, p. 250.
12. Electra, Ll. 32-37.
13. Richard G. Moulton, The Ancient Classical Drama, p. 150.
14. Philoctetes, Ll. 610-613.
15. Poetics, 1452a 1-4.
16. Ibid., 1452a 16-18.
17. Ibid., 1452a 22-24.
18. Ibid., 1452a 29-32.
19. Ajax, Ll. 710-712.
20. Ibid., Ll. 789-795.
21. Poetics, 1453b 22-25.
22. Ibid., 1454a 4-7.
23. John Addington Symonds, Studies Of The Greek Poets,

Vol. II, p. 157.

24. Antigone, Ll. 1108-1111.
25. Poetics, 1462a 18 - 1462b 1.
26. Lewis Campbell, A Guide To Greek Tragedy, p. 175.
27. Matthew Arnold as quoted by Elisabeth Woodbridge in  
The Drama - Its Law And Its Technique, p. 22.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of our study, as set forth in the Introduction, was to determine the mind of Aristotle concerning prophecy as an element of the tragic drama. This was to be done by an examination of the prophecies in the plays of Sophocles according to the principles propounded in the Poetics. Two questions had to be answered before a solution of the difficulty could be arrived at: 1) is prophecy a valid dramatic element ? and 2) if so, has it any special efficacy for producing the specific effect of tragedy ? In the subsequent chapters we sought the answers to these questions.

Aristotle's theory of art, we saw in Chapter One, is founded on the very essence of material being. A work of art should be an imitation not of an individual, but of the 'form' which is apprehended by the idea. Then the 'imitation' is 'better' than reality and 'tends to be universal'. In the drama a true 'imitation' is had only when each incident follows what has gone before as its probable or necessary effect. This is the primary law of the drama and Aristotle's norm for judging the dramatic validity of an incident. In the second chapter we applied this norm to the two supra-natural elements of Greek tragedy, the 'deus ex machina' and prophecy. The former, we

found, is an uncaused incident which causes the sequel. It constitutes a miraculous means of extrinsic determination and is, therefore, illegitimate as an incident of the drama. Prophecy, on the other hand, is an incident which is caused by the antecedents, but does not cause what follows. It is a natural means of self-guidance and hence a legitimate dramatic element. Having established the legitimacy of prophecy, we proceeded to a consideration of its tragic value. In the third chapter we saw that the tragic value of an incident depended upon its efficacy to arouse in the spectators the emotions of pity and fear. An examination of the prophecies in the plays of Sophocles revealed the fact that oracles and soothsayers are employed to intensify the tragic effect. They have a special significance in the tragic action, therefore, and produce an effect which is characteristic of the Greek drama.

We have answered both questions, then, which we proposed: according to the principles of Aristotle prophecy is legitimate as an incident of the drama and has special efficacy to produce the effects proper to tragedy. Since this is so, we can reasonably conclude that Aristotle approved the part which prophecy played in the tragedies of the Greeks.

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